Revisiting "Miss Aidoo's" *No Sweetness Here*

Anne Adams

At the funeral, in the forecourt of the State House in Accra, President Nana Akufo-Addo shared with us the fact that he and Ama Ata Aidoo had been contemporaries as undergraduates at the University of Ghana. In his eulogy, "the president emphasized that the deceased's groundbreaking works showcased her ability to weave captivating narratives that delved into complex social issues. He said she used her voice and pen to advocate for social justice, women's empowerment, and African identity. The president also recognized her immense contribution to the development of Ghana and the African continent." ("The world will miss you – Akufo-Addo eulogises Ama Ata Aidoo, " 2023, https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/The-world-will-miss-you-Akufo-Addo-eulogises-Ama-Ata-Aidoo-1803983).

Akufo-Addo's immediate predecessor, former President John Mahama, also published a tribute, acknowledging Aidoo's stature in the literary world and her generosity as a writer, especially mentoring him in his own writing. He mentioned particularly her passion for the establishment of free public education during the time when she served as Ghana's Minister for Education ("My tribute to the late Professor Ama Ata Aidoo - Mahama writes," 2023, https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/NewsArchive/My-tribute-to-the-late-Professor-Ama-Ata-Aidoo-Mahama-writes-1804112).

The tributes of both presidents, obviously recognizing Aidoo's contributions as a literary artist, also give attention to her engagement in Ghana's—and Africa's—social and cultural development. In fact, as we know, that engagement was realized as much through her literary writings as through her public activity. In fact, the reference to "weav[ing] captivating narratives that delved into complex social issues" could fit any of her works of fiction, drama, or poetry, spanning her long and productive literary career. While the "complex social issues" might appear most obvious in her mature works, such as *Changes* for example, they may be less apparent—or at least less critically

African Studies Review, Volume 66, Number 4 (December 2023), pp. 1013–1019

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the African Studies Association.
doi:10.1017/asr.2023.91

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2023.91 Published online by Cambridge University Press

noticed—in the younger Aidoo's short stories collected in *No Sweetness Here*—a regrettable case of myopia.

When *No Sweetness Here*, first published in 1970 in the UK, was re-published in a second edition two years later, an introduction was added by Ezekiel Mphahlele, the internationally recognized South African writer and journal editor, who is sometimes referred to as a founding figure of African literature. Undoubtedly, for a book by an African woman author being introduced to British and US readerships in the early 1970s, an introduction by Mphahlele, who by then had gained a reputation in Africa, Europe, and the US, would carry weight. (Aidoo had published a stridently political Introduction to the 1969 edition of Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, in which her concern about the neocolonial Ghanaian society was evident: "And so it was that, after independence, the country found itself infested with 'party activists' who preached socialism and yet themselves could never accumulate enough property to satisfy their greedy souls" [Boston: Colliers, 1969, ix].)

What's more, Mphahlele's Introduction would influence readers' reception of the work. His opening paragraph is worth re-visiting:

> Challenge—ambivalence—the pendulum of choices—homecoming—urban dissipation—the urban odyssey—urban delusions—rustic complexities and naïvetés—underprivileged womanhood and the arrogance of manhood—motherhood—the arrogance of the elite and its female victims—coups d'état—other versions of the mother image. This young Ghanaian woman has a style which is not duplicated anywhere in English-speaking Africa: the superb use of dialogue, monologue, to evoke atmosphere, to create dramatic situations. Underneath the delicate texture of the diction one hears movement, an internal monologue, which tells us where it's at. And there is a note of sadness throughout, even when she celebrates womanhood and motherhood. ("Introduction," in *No Sweetness Here* by Ama Ata Aidoo [NY: Anchor Books, 1972])

Apart from praising the orality of Aidoo's innovative style, Mphahlele emphasized her attention to suffering women in what he labeled "victimhood." This perhaps understandable perspective could well have been a product of Mphahlele's sensibilities to women's lives, from his personal experience and as represented in his own writings. James Ogude, discussing Mphahlele as one of Africa's "foundational writers," says,

> Mphahlele's women … come through as strong and resilient. They are figures full of life and authority. He attributes his obsession with compassion as an important influence in his life to the women of Marabastad, including her [*sic*] mother. He writes: "At the end of the tunnel of time, I see the women of Marabastad and say to myself: there was a noble chance for a feminine identification on my part." ("Foundational Writers and the Making of African Literary Genealogy: Es'kia Mphahlele and Peter Abraham," in *Foundational African Writers: Peter Abrahams, Noni Jabavu, Sibusiso Nyembezi and*

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2023.91 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> *Es'kia Mphahlele,* edited by Bhekizizwe Peterson, Khwezi Mkhize, Makhosazana Xaba, and Simon Gikandi, 42 [Johannesburg, South Africa: Wits University Press; University of the Witwatersrand, 2022])

Concluding that Mphahlele's presentation of women characters was exceptional among foundational African writers, Ogude says,

> My point is that the range and colourful representation of such forceful women figures only became prominent in the fiction of female African writers in the late 1970s and after. In striking ways, therefore, Mphahlele anticipates a range of gender discourses and politics that would find amplification only much later amongst contemporary female writers like Ama Ata Aidoo, Mariama Bâ, Buchi Emecheta, Tsitsi Dangarembga and Yvonne Vera, amongst others. ("Foundational Writers and the Making of African Literary Genealogy," 43)

This might explain the fact that Mphahlele's attention to the matters of the female figures dominated his appreciation of the eleven stories in Aidoo's collection.

But even in his commentaries on women's stories in the collection, a re-reading of his Introduction reveals that Mphahlele did not recognize in Aidoo's women some similar strengths, even nobility, that he had invested in his own female characters in analogous situations. For example, Ogude points out the impact that the labor migration system had on African families in the South Africa of the 1930s, which forced women to assume responsibilities as head of the household. Hence, in Mphahlele's writings "we find a very different representation of women that only the largely female-headed families in South African townships could allow" ("Foundational Writers and the Making of African Literary Genealogy," 41). Mphahlele did not recognize that Aidoo's female characters of Northern Ghana—albeit depicted as forbearing Muslim women whose husbands were taken away by the demands of labor migration and who consequently took on the role of head of household, as in "Certain Winds from the South"—are Aidoo's counterparts to the robust women in the townships that Mphahlele himself had depicted. Similarly, Mphahlele mis-recognized the self-empowerment of women such as Auntie Araba, of "Something to Talk About on the Way to the Funeral," who, despite the vicissitudes of her life as a mother, earned the respect and admiration of everyone in her town as a successful businesswoman and role model for survival with dignity.

Focusing so intently on the plight of "victimized" women, Mphahlele inaccurately casts Aidoo's male characters as marginal:

> The men in Miss Aidoo's fiction are mere shadows or voices or just 'fillers.' Somewhere, quietly, they seem to be manipulating the woman's life or negatively controlling it or simply having a good time, knowing that they are assured of something like divine top-dog position in life. ("Introduction," xx)

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2023.91 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Ironically, though, Mphahlele devotes the most attention of any of the stories discussed in his Introduction to one that centers entirely around a relationship between two male characters ("For Whom Things Did Not Change"). On the other hand, his Introduction overlooked other stories in which male characters were either the central figures ("In the Cutting of a Drink") or were supportive of women and critical to the plot ("The Message"). The former story, which depicts "urban dissipation—the urban odyssey—urban delusions—rustic complexities and naïvetés," which Mphahlele enumerated among Aidoo's themes, follows two men, one of them a young "naïve rustic," who, accompanied by his male cousin, tries to find his sister who has migrated to the city. He learns that, in her effort to make a life for herself in the city, she not only has become a prostitute but also views her job as "Any kind of work is work." In "The Message," for Nana Amfoa, also a "rustic" journeying to the city, the compassionate support of the endearingly gruff male lorry driver is critical to the success of her quest to find her granddaughter in the hospital, who has given birth to twins through a for her unheard-of caesarian section. The men in these stories cannot be marginalized as "mere shadows or voices or just fillers." Mphahlele's attention was consumed by the struggles of the women, whom he viewed simplistically as oppressed.

But what Mphahlele missed was that the whole matter of gender in these stories is only one component of the "complex social issues" referred to in the president's eulogy, which characterized Aidoo's work from the first to the last. Mphahlele unfortunately was not able to recognize in *No Sweetness Here* that Aidoo's concern for gender matters was woven into her "advoca[cy for] social justice … and African identity." His myopic perception led Mphahlele to observe:

> In the stories that deal with the clash of cultural values, the white man does not feature in flesh and blood. But you can see the huge footprints, the huge finger marks which indicate what he has left behind: the arrogant lawyer or doctor, the disoriented student, the Rest House, the young students and even the villagers. Ama Ata Aidoo's Ghana is a microcosm of Africa. ("Introduction," ix)

Mphahlele was right: the white man absolutely did not feature in Aidoo's stories about Ghana. Rather, it was that very arrogant lawyer or doctor—Africa's neocolonialist professionals, civil servants, and politicians—walking in those footprints, imprinting with the finger marks, who *did* feature in Aidoo's Ghana. Like Mphahlele, Aidoo had traveled and lived abroad, particularly in East Africa as well as West Africa and the US. Like Mphahlele, Aidoo had acquired a pan-African perspective that enabled her to create a "microcosm of Africa" in her fictionalized Ghana. Even before her travels, Aidoo had grown up in Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana and was influenced in the early years by his vision of pan-Africanism. Mphahlele himself was present at Nkrumah's 1958 All-African People's Conference and was introduced to

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2023.91 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Nkrumah's ideas. Perhaps, as a black South African in exile from apartheid, looking for the flesh-and-blood white man in the post-colonial Africa where he moved around, the cosmopolitan Mphahlele was unable to recognize/ perceive in *No Sweetness Here* that it was the neocolonial African, not the (officially) departed white man, who was, in one form or another, the focus of Aidoo's attention.

Among other examples, "Two Sisters" and "Something to Talk About on the Way to the Funeral" probe the "complex issues" of power and class in neocolonial Ghana. But the story to which Mphahlele devoted one-third of the Introduction, "For Whom Things Did Not Change," most thoroughly lays out issues of social and economic power as exercised by the political and professional classes. And, regarding Mphahlele's interest in the situation of women, one significant aspect of the neocolonial economic power on the social situation presented in "For Whom …" as well as in "Two Sisters" is the convention of "big men" luring young women with material gifts, which in turn also enrich the girls' families, thus enticing the families to encourage the girls in those relationships. And, although Mphahlele did articulate that "It is black authority that victimizes us today. It is the black capitalist we have to be content with," this point is made only within his discussion of "For Whom Things Did Not Change." What is regrettable is that Mphahlele, in writing an overview of the book, did not recognize the presence of the "black authority," the "black capitalists"—the neocolonialists—as a significant theme of neocolonial social and economic problems presented in the book.

Thus, while the publication of *No Sweetness Here* unquestionably benefitted from the Introduction by the venerated writer and critic Ezekiel Mphahlele, in helping to present this young African woman author to a wider community of readers and critics, the unconsciously skewed emphasis on gender arguably limited a fuller appreciation of Aidoo's vision. Two important studies of *No Sweetness Here* call attention to this imbalance, both referencing Aidoo's political vision in their titles: Vincent Odamtten's chapter in *The Art of Ama Ata Aidoo: Polylectics and Reading against Neocolonialism* (Tallahassee: University of Florida Press, 1994) and Ketu Katrak's Afterword to the 1995 re-publication, *Telling Stories and Transforming Postcolonial Society in Ama Ata Aidoo's* No Sweetness Here and Other Stories (New York: Feminist Press, 135–57).

Odamtten speaks specifically of the effects of Mphahlele's Introduction (allowing the focus on women): "Although Mphahlele's focus is not misplaced, succeeding criticism has tended to seize upon feminism as the primary or privileged concern of Aidoo's literary project" (Odamtten, 80). Katrak informs us, further, that it was only the 1972 edition that was available in the US until the 1995 re-publication. This could certainly account for the far-reaching effect of Mphahlele's imbalanced Introduction.

Perhaps the most critical factor in this imbalance is the absence from the Introduction of any mention of the opening story, which is, in fact, a litany of cultural, economic, social, and political issues that would encumber the

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2023.91 Published online by Cambridge University Press

"development of Ghana and the African continent," to quote from the President's eulogy. The first story's very title, "Everything Counts," is an anguished advisory to refute the allegation that "we have no confidence in ourselves" (*No Sweetness Here* [New York: Anchor Books], 2). It is an advisory also about the perils of neo-colonial wholesale imitation of the West and acceptance of Western cast-offs and "expertise," even as African intellectuals were spouting theories of "the revolution." Here, Aidoo's "Sissie" narrator is the complete opposite of a suffering female victim; rather, she is an educated, vocal, politically energized lecturer in economics, taking up her first teaching job after returning from her studies abroad. The impact of Aidoo's "advisory" is effected by the broad range of issues that cause Sissie concern: "Perhaps her people have really missed the boat of original thinking, after all?" (*No Sweetness Here*, 2).

She reflects on

> the people at home scrambling to pay exorbitant prices for second-hand clothes from America … second-rate experts giving first-class dangerous advice; second-hand machinery from someone else's junkyard.
> Snow-ploughs for tropical farms.
> Outmoded tractors.
> Discarded aeroplanes. And now, wigs.
> (*No Sweetness Here*, 1–2)

And, of course, complementing the wigs are skin-lightening products, which appear to Sissie as "a plague that made funny patchworks on faces and necks" (*No Sweetness Here*, 4). Regarding the wholesale consuming of Western products, even her family members hope that the car Sissie has brought back is a big one, "not one of those little coconut shells with two doors … But how could she tell them that cars and fridges are ropes with which we are hanging ourselves?" And, to cap this litany of Africans' "total immersion" in things European, Aidoo gives us the beauty contest won by the light-skinned, bi-racial contestant (*No Sweetness Here*, 7).

Sissie's idealism and her own vision of the revolution fires her up to engage her students: "She was going to tell them what is what. That as students of economics their role in nation-building was going to be crucial. Much more than big-mouthed, big-living politicians, they could do vital work to save the continent from the grips of its enemies" (*No Sweetness Here*, 5). But, even in her idealism, she is realistic enough to acknowledge "that they themselves were neither prepared nor ready to face the realities and give up those aspects of their personal dream, which stood between them and the meaningful actions they ought to take" (*No Sweetness Here*, 3–4).

There was obviously a reason that "Everything Counts," with its litany of social, cultural, economic, and political matters, was placed first in the collection. Revisiting "Miss Aidoo's" *No Sweetness Here* now from the vantage point of her entire oeuvre, makes it clear that, from the first piece in this first

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2023.91 Published online by Cambridge University Press

prose publication, until the end of her writing career—until the end of her life, actually—Ama Ata Aidoo's intrepid grapplings with the myriad aspects of the development of her beloved Ghana and the African continent define the legacy she left to them.

Anne Adams
Cornell University
Ithaca, New York, USA
ava2@cornell.edu

https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2023.91 Published online by Cambridge University Press